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Chair: Mr. García González ..... (El Salvador)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 51: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (A/68/13; A/68/13/Add.1; A/68/388; A/68/347; A/68/343 and A/68/335)

1. **The Chair** said that for almost 64 years, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had been providing protection, education, health, relief and social services to a large number of Palestine refugees, currently numbering approximately 5 million. The Agency had been operating under very difficult conditions, sometimes in conflict areas, with limited financial support. It could not be asked to support Palestine refugees without being given the necessary resources to carry out its mandate.

Statement by the Commissioner-General of UNRWA

2. **Mr. Grandi** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) said that the question of the Palestine refugees remained at the heart of the quest for peace in the Middle East. Those refugees had become unwittingly entangled in other conflicts, and served as living proof of a conflict unresolved across generations and a symbol of how costly the failure to make peace could be. Almost half of them remained subjected to Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories and many were also enduring the maelstrom of the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic. Their vulnerability and protection needs had increased dramatically in recent years in all five fields of operation of UNRWA. In keeping with the international community's commitment to the well-being of Palestine refugees, enshrined in United Nations resolutions, the Agency should be adequately supported and funded.

3. Indeed, the refugees' sense of vulnerability and fears of abandonment were profoundly exacerbated by the Agency's chronic funding shortfalls. Although core education and health services had been maintained, the shortage of special humanitarian funds in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon, largely owing to funds being directed to the Syrian crisis, had led UNRWA to reduce the humanitarian support it provided to some groups in those areas, which in turn had spurred widespread protests and demonstrations. Although there was a new if fragile opportunity for progress in the Middle East peace process, if it did not produce a positive outcome, the full reflection of Palestinian statehood on the ground would remain in abeyance, leaving the refugee situation in limbo. That situation of promise coupled with uncertainty fuelled frustration among Palestine refugees, especially the youth, who represented almost one third of the refugee population. Failure to support UNRWA at such a critical juncture would be interpreted as a de facto abdication of responsibilities towards the refugees and would weaken the Agency.

4. While the international community was focused on the Syrian crisis, it seemed to be ignoring the ever-worsening situation in Gaza. The economy there was moribund, a situation exacerbated by the closure of tunnels through which basic commodities were entering the area and the blanket ban on exports. The number of Palestine refugees dependent on externally provided humanitarian assistance, along with youth unemployment, had risen exponentially. UNRWA alone was providing food to 800,000 people, representing half the population. Those growing challenges made it impossible for UNRWA to fully fund all its work in Gaza. Emergency resources for food and job creation and cash payments to the poorest refugees and for school feeding programmes had been cut, owing to the funding shortfall. With heightened food insecurity and the outlook for 2014 gloomier still, humanitarian operations in Gaza might well not be sustained at adequate levels.

5. In the short term, the deteriorating economic conditions and growing political and security tensions, including Israeli incursions and rockets launched towards southern Israel, were a recipe for yet another crisis which the international community should do its utmost to prevent. In the medium term, it was predicted that by 2020, infrastructure, energy, water and other assets would be insufficient to sustain life in Gaza, unless decisive changes were made by stakeholders, including a lifting of the blockade, with the support of the international community. In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, home to almost 750,000 Palestine refugees, the security and economic situation was deteriorating. The refugees continued to be alienated from their rights and land by stifling restrictions imposed by the Government of Israel and by the inexorable growth of settlements, which were illegal under international law. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund had warned that the West Bank economy was unsustainable under such conditions. Other causes of concern included forced displacement through settlement expansion, home demolitions and

restrictions on Palestinian communities, including in East Jerusalem. There were also increased incidents of settler violence and threats of forcible transfer facing the Bedouin community, in particular in Areas C and E1, as well as greater use of live ammunition during Israeli military operations around Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank.

6. The Syrian crisis continued to have a Palestinian refugee component which must be addressed, because it was an international responsibility with specific and sensitive human and political ramifications. While UNRWA strove to maintain its regular education and health services, nearly all of the approximately 550,000 Palestine refugees registered in the Syrian Arab Republic also needed emergency assistance, including those that had sought safety in Lebanon and other countries. That number was set to rise as previously self-sufficient refugees continued to turn to the Agency for support. About half of all Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic were displaced, with thousands seeking shelter in the Agency's schools and other facilities. The Agency had been unable to reach several groups of refugees, including those trapped inside the Yarmouk and Sbeineh camps, for several months. The lack of humanitarian access to those camps was having deadly consequences, based on anonymous reports and mounting evidence of malnutrition and infectious diseases, particularly among children and the elderly.

7. The Committee should therefore join the Agency in condemning in the strongest terms the profound suffering being endured by civilians trapped in those situations and to appeal to the Syrian authorities to allow Palestinian civilians — wherever they lived in the Syrian Arab Republic — the full spectrum of protection to which they were entitled, including protection against kidnapping, detention and other such violations. While commendable progress was being made on important issues related to the conflict, such as the destruction of chemical weapons, increased fighting and denial of access to relief organizations worsened the plight of civilians and endangered the lives of humanitarian workers. As a result of the conflict, the Agency had lost 8 of its staff and 19 others were missing; 59 of its 180 facilities had been damaged, and an estimated 46,000 Palestinian refugee homes had been destroyed.

8. Nevertheless, the Agency continued to operate in the Syrian Arab Republic, adapting constantly to the changing situation. Its provision of cash payments, food assistance, medicines and non-food items to Palestine refugees had doubled every six months since the beginning of the conflict; its health and education services sustained families and held communities together; and about 43,000 Palestine refugee children attended UNRWA schools in the Syrian Arab Republic, although 35 per cent did not. In the health field, the Agency's innovative approaches, including mobile health points and satellite education through television, had helped to mitigate the contraction of humanitarian space. Similarly, its microfinance programme supported creative new businesses that had sprung up amidst the conflict. Its cash distribution to refugees in both the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon and the distribution of hygiene kits, blankets and warm clothes alleviated the immediate vulnerability of those who had been displaced.

9. The Member States that had made a contribution to finance the activities of UNRWA following the United Nations consolidated appeals for the Syrian Arab Republic and neighbouring States deserved commendation. Thanks to their efforts, 65 per cent of the Agency's emergency requirements for 2013, estimated at $290 million, had been funded. Unfortunately, however, a 25 per cent increase in its funding requirements was still anticipated in 2014.

10. Many Palestinians had fled the Syrian Arab Republic to seek refuge elsewhere, including in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon and, tragically and without precedent, even in Europe. To make matters worse, two boats carrying those refugees had sunk in the Mediterranean, killing as many as 200 Palestinians. The enormous risks which some of them had been forced to take served as a reminder of their growing vulnerability and of their feeling of being increasingly unwelcome in the region. In Lebanon in particular, the influx of Palestine refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic had compounded the problems in already overcrowded refugee camps. Furthermore, since no progress had been made on implementing legislation to enhance employment opportunities for Palestine refugees in Lebanon, poverty among them continued to be endemic and could only get worse. A priority was to finish the reconstruction of the Nahr al-Bared camp, which had been totally destroyed in 2007, leaving 27,000 refugees homeless, but funding remained slow and inadequate. It would therefore be important for donors, in particular Governments in the Arab region,

to step up efforts to provide funding for the reconstruction of that camp.

11. The most stable field of operation of UNRWA was Jordan which, since 1948, had made significant efforts to accommodate millions of Palestine refugees and recently received a large refugee population from the Syrian Arab Republic. While expressing appreciation for those efforts, he urged Jordan to consider granting temporary access to Palestinians fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic for urgent humanitarian reasons.

12. The Agency was under severe financial pressure and was unable to adequately fund its basic programmes through its General Fund, which currently showed a cash deficit of $48 million. If that deficit was not covered, it would be unable to pay the salaries of teachers, medical personnel, social workers and other staff by December 2013, bringing its operations to a standstill. In that connection, the Agency had done its utmost to contain its expenses through rigorously applied austerity measures and to expand its donor base. It had received the renewed commitment of the members of the League of Arab States to achieve and sustain the longstanding target of 7.8 per cent for their contributions to the Agency's programmes. Achieving that target was essential for solving the Agency's immediate funding problems. He appealed to States in other regions, notably Asia and Latin America, to consider increasing their support to UNRWA.

13. The Agency was forging ahead with its reform agenda. About half of its health centres had adopted e-health tools and 21 of them were piloting the family health team approach designed to offer primary care to patients and reduce the incidence of non-communicable diseases. Its educational programmes were focusing more on teacher development, human rights, conflict resolution and upgraded vocational training. It was taking a new holistic approach to tackling poverty, which would be at the heart of its medium-term strategy for 2016-2021, focusing on the abject poor, in particular vulnerable refugees and youth.

14. Lastly, recalling that his tenure as Commissioner-General would soon end, he paid special homage to people who had lost their lives in the service of UNRWA and the staff members, teachers, medical and social workers for their dedication and commitment. He thanked the General Assembly, and especially the Fourth Committee, the host countries and all donors for their support throughout his tenure. He reiterated that the Agency's services must be maintained until a just and lasting solution was found to the plight of the Palestine refugees. He believed that his successor would find in UNRWA an organization that was in positive transformation, in which substantive management and programme reforms had taken solid hold.

Interactive dialogue

15. **Mr. Mansour** (Observer for the State of Palestine) wished to know what steps UNRWA was taking to address its financial crisis, especially in the light of the pledges of further support received from the members of the League of Arab States, among others. He also sought more information about the Agency's emergency appeal for Gaza and efforts that should be made to revive the economy and alleviate the suffering the Palestine civilian population in Gaza.

16. **Mr. Grandi** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) said that the Agency had managed to reduce its costs without reducing basic services. However, it had reached the limits of that exercise and had therefore appealed to donors to fulfil their pledges of support. More regular contributions were required to ensure the Agency's sustainability. Financial contributions from donors were important for reviving the economy in Gaza, but even more crucial was the lifting of the Israeli blockade. While he respected Israel's legitimate security concerns, he hoped that the blockade would be gradually relaxed to lift the ban on exports which was stifling the economy.

Statement by the Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA

17. **Ms. Syed** (Norway) said that the Agency's financial situation was becoming a fully fledged crisis which, if not promptly addressed, would hinder its ability to provide basic services to Palestine refugees. Approximately 80 per cent of the Agency's General Fund expenditure related to staff costs and, as the refugee population continued to grow, the cost of maintaining its services was also increasing. Since the Agency had entered 2013 with a working capital deficit of $49.7 million, if its forecast cash deficit of $48 million was not covered, its working capital deficit would total approximately $93 million in 2014. The Working Group had taken note of the Agency's efforts to widen its donor base and called for the early and complete fulfilment of outstanding donor pledges to UNRWA.

18. Against the backdrop of the proposed overall reduction of the United Nations regular budget, UNRWA was facing not only financial difficulties but also political instability in its five fields of operations. Tight restrictions on the movement of its staff and humanitarian goods in and out of the Occupied Palestinian Territory was a matter of concern to the Working Group. She called upon the Government of Israel to accord the Agency free and unfettered access and to open crossings into Gaza to allow for the unimpeded flow of humanitarian aid, commercial goods and persons, in accordance with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009). In fulfilling its protection mandate, UNRWA had to overcome various operational challenges stemming from the ongoing Israeli blockade of Gaza, access difficulties in the West Bank, settler-related violence and forced displacement. The Palestinian Authority still owed the Agency $83 million for goods and services procured, although some progress was being been made to address that problem.

19. The Working Group called on all Member States to explore the possibility of funding the UNRWA appeal for Gaza and the West Bank. She called on the international community to fully fund the UNRWA Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan, and on all parties to the catastrophic conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic to preserve the neutrality of the refugee camps and the security of Palestine refugees in that country. She also called on neighbouring countries to maintain open borders for those refugees fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic and thanked those that were already doing so.

20. The Working Group was concerned at the lack of financial resources and at the new challenges facing UNRWA in Lebanon following the influx of Palestine refugees, and reiterated the dire need to close the shortfall in the Agency's General Fund. It urged Governments that had not yet done so to contribute to UNRWA, in particular to the General Fund, on a regular basis and those that had done so to strive to increase their contributions. The Working Group also urged Governments to fully fund the Agency's General Fund for the biennium 2012-2013, to ensure that the real value of contributions to the Agency was maintained. She also called on Governments to put in place increased multi-year funding schemes to allow UNRWA to better plan its activities.

General debate

21. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine), commending Lebanon, Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic for their unquantifiable contribution in hosting the Palestine refugees, and the donor community for its generosity in support of the Agency's mission, said that the international community's commitment to providing political, financial and moral support to the Palestine refugees remained absolutely vital, pending realization of a just solution to the conflict. The more than 5 million Palestine refugees, many of whom lived in camps, including in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, where they also endured the oppression of Israel's military occupation, remained at the core of the historical search for a comprehensive solution to the question of Palestine and for an end to the prolonged tragic conflict. Since its inception in 1950, UNRWA had embodied the international community's responsibility to act collectively in accordance with international law and the principles of justice to alleviate the human tragedy of the Palestine refugees.

22. The international community must continue to affirm the right of the Palestine refugees to return to their homes and to receive compensation, in accordance with international law and General Assembly resolution 194 (III); and the right of Palestinians displaced in the June 1967 hostilities to return to their homes and lands in accordance with relevant United Nations resolutions. Despite the resumption of negotiations and the recognition that the question of the Palestine refugees was one of the final status issues to be resolved, Israel continued with its inflammatory rhetoric to deny the refugees their rights, further undermining the good faith required to achieve a peace settlement. A just solution for the refugees remained a high priority and a central element in a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole.

23. Palestine refugee communities in the West Bank and Gaza continued to suffer from the impact of illegal Israeli policies and measures such as the forced displacement of hundreds of Bedouin families, the building of settlements and the severe restrictions on the movement of persons and goods. Under those circumstances, it was regrettable that financial deficits of UNRWA had forced the Agency to reduce assistance to 21,000 vulnerable refugee families in Gaza. During the past year, the tragic conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic had also had an extremely negative impact on

almost the entire Palestine refugee community, many of whom had been forced to flee to neighbouring countries, enduring loss of life and injury, destruction of their shelters, further displacement, and loss of their livelihood. The crisis had also affected the Agency's operations, compelling it to focus more on the increasing needs for humanitarian aid. His delegation stressed that the refugee camps should remain neutral and that all civilians should be protected. It was also appreciative of the efforts of all the humanitarian organizations to help the refugees and of the countries in the region providing them with a safe haven.

24. In Lebanon, it was regrettable that 87 per cent of the families from the Nahr el-Bared camp remained displaced and that the camp's reconstruction continued to be hampered by financial difficulties. UNRWA should continue its efforts to ease the hardship and ensure the dignity of the refugees in the face of endemic poverty and persistent overcrowding in the camp. Legislation to facilitate access for the Palestine refugees to the labour market must also be implemented. In Jordan, however, the situation of refugees remained stable. The Jordanian Government was working in close cooperation with UNRWA and should continue to do so in what was a time of crisis. It was difficult to imagine how the Palestine refugees could cope and persevere without the Agency's assistance.

25. Lastly, his delegation welcomed the appointment of Mr. Mohammed Assaf, a Palestine refugee from the Gaza Strip, as the first Regional Youth Ambassador of UNRWA, which sent a hopeful message to Palestine refugee children and youth that they still had opportunities available to them despite their difficult circumstances. The international community should live up to its responsibilities and obligations in support of the peaceful aspirations of the Palestinian people to realize their inalienable rights, to bring an end to the conflict and injustice, and to achieve comprehensive peace and stability in the region.

26. **Mr. Dehghani** (Islamic Republic of Iran), speaking on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, said that UNRWA had been providing humanitarian assistance and technical support to some 5 million registered Palestine refugees for more than 60 years, despite instability in the region and the financial constraints it faced. The Non-Aligned Movement was gravely concerned about the critical situation of the Palestine refugees, whose human rights were being constantly violated by the Israeli occupying forces. The endangerment of the refugees' safety by military raids, the imposition of severe movement restrictions and forced displacement of Palestinian civilians harmed the refugee population and continued to undermine the Agency's programmes and activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

27. Israel's illegal policies and practices were in gross violation of the Charter of the United Nations and other international conventions. Israel must cease its breaches of the inviolability of United Nations premises, and its harassment and obstruction of the movement of Agency personnel. The Non-Aligned Movement therefore called on the international community to fulfil its moral, political and legal responsibilities to bring an end to Israel's illegal policies and all its violations against the Palestinian people. Israel's illegal blockade was crippling the economy of Gaza and had a destructive impact on the socioeconomic and humanitarian conditions of the refugee community and on the work of UNRWA, and should be ended to allow for the free and regular movement of persons and goods between Gaza and the outside world.

28. The Movement was also concerned about the situation of the Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic, many of whom had fled to other countries to seek refuge. It called on all donors to be as generous as possible, to help UNRWA overcome its chronic funding shortfalls and the uncertainties induced by economic and political volatility in its fields of operation. In that regard, it welcomed General Assembly resolution 65/272, which requested the Secretary-General to support the institutional strengthening of the Agency through the provision of financial resources from the regular budget of the United Nations. The international community should further intensify its efforts to achieve a settlement that guaranteed an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, the emergence of a sovereign and viable State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a just solution to the Palestine refugee problem on the basis of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions.

29. **Mr. Vrailas** (Observer for the European Union), speaking also on behalf of the candidate countries Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; the stabilization and association process countries Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina; and, in addition, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, expressed alarm at the ongoing conflict in the

Syrian Arab Republic, which was taking a tremendous toll on Palestine refugees and the staff of UNRWA, and was having a significant impact on neighbouring countries, particularly Lebanon. The European Union therefore called for the full and immediate implementation of the statement by the President of the Security Council, issued on 2 October 2013 (S/PRST/2013/15), concerning the humanitarian situation in the Middle East.

30. As the main donor to UNRWA, the European Union and its member States were particularly concerned about the Agency's financial situation, which was clearly unsustainable. Its medium-term strategy constituted a truly unique opportunity to address the sustainability of its core operations and cost containment, while settling the framework for future financial decisions. Of course, adjustments to salary differentials, austerity measures and a focus on efficiency, while necessary, would not be sufficient. The Agency would have to focus on its core activities and develop partnership opportunities, especially for relief and social services; to the extent possible, those activities should be funded through the General Fund.

31. The European Union urged other donors, including first-time donors, to share the burden of helping UNRWA address its financial challenges. In that regard, it welcomed the commitment of the members of the League of Arab States to achieve and sustain the 7.8 per cent target for their contributions to the core budget of UNRWA. The European Union was determined to ensure that the essential humanitarian and development needs of the refugees were continually met until their situation was resolved as part of a comprehensive future settlement of final status issues.

32. **Ms. Gunnarsdóttir** (Iceland) said that the staff of UNRWA worked in an increasingly difficult situation in the Agency's five fields of operation, all of which were tangibly affected by armed conflict or humanitarian issues. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the number of Palestine refugees in need was fast approaching half a million; thousands had been forced to leave their homes and had become internally displaced persons, while others had been forced to leave the country altogether. They should all be afforded equal protection. Against that backdrop, the Agency's current financial situation was unsustainable. Her Government had and would continue to support the Agency and hoped that other Member States would do likewise.

33. Iceland supported the Agency's four goals for the Palestine refugees, namely a long and healthy life, acquired knowledge and skills, a decent standard of living, and human rights enjoyed to the fullest. The Palestine refugees remained a forgotten group outside their immediate environment and it was crucial that their needs should be addressed in the current peace negotiations. Iceland hoped that sooner rather than later there would be a just and lasting solution to their plight.

34. **Mr. Maso** (South Africa) said that armed conflict affected all five fields of operation of UNRWA, including its ability to meet the needs of Palestine refugees, who had been displaced for six decades and whose plight could be addressed only by a just and durable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in accordance with international law. The international community's failure to free the Palestinian people from the bondage of occupation was an indictment on all freedom-loving people, who were compelled to ensure complete self-determination for the people of Palestine. South Africa remained concerned about the plight of the Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic, thousands of whom had had their homes damaged or destroyed and more than 50 per cent of whom had been displaced.

35. Even though the reported shortfall in the funding of UNRWA raised serious concerns about its ability to implement its programmes fully, the Agency had been able to fulfil its mandate and to achieve some of its humanitarian goals, especially where there were no restrictions on the movement of its personnel. South Africa would do what it could, within its modest means, to support the Agency's work. It condemned Israel's imposition of illegal transit charges on shipments entering Gaza, as well as its blockade of the Gaza Strip and occupation of the Palestinian territories as a whole. In the context of renewed negotiations, the international community must redouble its efforts to find a lasting and sustainable solution to the question of Palestine, including the cessation of all illegal Israeli settlement activities.

36. **Mr. Yoshikawa** (Japan) said that, as a member of both the Advisory Commission and the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, Japan had been increasing its financial contributions to the Agency, tripling them from $8.7 million in 2009 to $27 million in 2012. His Government would also be announcing soon that it would be providing a significant amount of aid to the

Agency for the purchase of wheat flour and other commodities to be distributed to about 300,000 Palestine refugees living in the State of Palestine, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan. The creation of viable economic foundations would help to advance the peace process. In that regard, his Government had undertaken two concrete initiatives: the "Corridor for Peace and Prosperity" project, which was designed to transform, through regional cooperation, an area of the Jordan Valley into productive agricultural land for the people of Palestine; and the "Conference on Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development", a process aimed at mobilizing and sharing East Asian economic development and resources for the sake of Palestinian development.

37. **Mr. Wehbi** (Lebanon) said that the history of the last century had shown that ethnic cleansing should not be repeated; international law should be fully respected; and the United Nations should be able to uphold the principles enshrined in its Charter. It was therefore necessary to achieve a just and comprehensive solution to the Middle East conflict, including the question of Palestine. In that regard, his delegation considered the resumption of peace talks to be a positive step. Considering the crucial role played by UNRWA in alleviating the social and economic burdens of the Palestine refugees despite its structural financial crisis, his Government worked closely with the Agency to fulfil its mandate in the 12 camps located on Lebanese territory. While the contributions to the partial reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared camp were welcome, Lebanon reiterated its call for the full disbursement of the pledges made by donors.

38. The Lebanese Government had amended its labour legislation and established the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee to improve the livelihoods of Palestine refugees who were on Lebanese territory, even though they were only there temporarily. In that connection, it was important to implement their right to return to their homeland, as stipulated in General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The current regional events also had a direct impact on Palestine refugees in their host countries. While Lebanon's stance on the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic had consistently been one of disassociation, the country did not dissociate itself from its humanitarian obligations and had kept its borders open to the increasing influx of refugees. His Government was appreciative of the generosity showed by many countries under the Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan and urged donors to provide UNRWA with sound and sustainable funding. It was also high time to put an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and to enable the Palestinian people to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination.

39. **Mr. Al Khalil** (Senegal) said that a history full of upheaval had transformed many Palestinians into internally displaced persons and forced others to flee their homeland in search of refuge in countries such as Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan. UNRWA had been created to provide those refugees with education, medical, social and other forms of humanitarian assistance. To better fulfil its mandate, the Agency had introduced reforms in 2007 to help improve its resource management, planning and mobilization systems. Its innovative health-care strategy was based on the family health team programme, which focused on the treatment of chronic non-communicable diseases. In education and training, the reform strategy focused on eight main areas, including education for all, technical and vocational training, and research and development.

40. Despite the Agency's essential role in assisting the Palestine refugees, it continued to be subject to financial difficulties which limited the scope of its interventions and had forced it to end its assistance to 21,000 refugee families in the Gaza Strip. It was therefore necessary to strengthen international solidarity and to increase contributions to the Agency's General Fund. The fate of the 5 million Palestine refugees was intricately linked with the peace process, the creation of a sovereign Palestinian State within viable borders and respect for their legitimate right of return. He hoped that the renewed mediation efforts would help to find a solution to the crisis and to achieve peace, to allow the refugees to return to their ancestral lands.

41. **Mr. Hamed** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that while the international community must fulfil not only its humanitarian but also its political, legal and moral responsibilities towards the Palestine refugees. For decades, Israel had refused to comply with relevant United Nations resolutions concerning its occupation of Arab land. More than 5 million Palestine refugees now suffered the consequences of Israel's systematic campaign to expel them from their homes and deny them their most basic rights. It was, moreover, clear that the international community's utter paralysis in the

face of such blatant disregard for international law merely encouraged Israel to continue its campaign to drive the Palestinians from their homeland.

42. Arab countries hosting Palestine refugees were also donors, providing them with a wide range of services. The Syrian Arab Republic would continue to host and provide support to the Palestine refugees and treat them as if they were Syrian citizens, until they were able to return to their homeland, in accordance with United Nations resolutions. In October 2013, the Syrian Government had adopted legislation that provided for both Palestine refugees and Syrian citizens to receive compensation for attacks perpetrated against them by armed terrorist groups. Moreover, in the first six months of 2013 alone, his Government had spent US$121 million on projects to support Palestine refugees, despite the ongoing crisis in the country. In that connection, the Syrian delegation emphasized that the unilateral sanctions imposed by certain States had increased the suffering of all civilians in the country, including Palestine refugees.

43. The Syrian Government would continue to do its utmost to support the work of UNRWA and had even strengthened its collaboration with the Agency during the current crisis. It deeply regretted that many Palestine refugees and UNRWA staff had been killed, particularly as they had been targeted in violent attacks by armed terrorist groups. Their situation would have been far worse, however, were it not for the efforts of the Syrian authorities to combat those groups and protect UNRWA facilities and staff. His Government was also doing everything possible to counter attempts to draw the Palestine refugees into the conflict in its country.

44. It was critical that UNRWA was allocated the financial resources it needed to carry out its mandate effectively. He called on donors to uphold their financial commitments to the Agency, which should also carry on with its efforts to expand its donor base. It was shocking that, for reasons that were known to all, certain countries continued to spend huge sums to pursue foreign wars and foster terrorism and provide significant moral and military support to Israel. Indeed, if only a small proportion of those vast sums were used to alleviate the plight of the Palestine refugees, their lives could be improved immeasurably. His delegation strongly urged those States to reconsider their positions and to fully uphold the Charter of the United Nations and international law.

45. **Mr. Rey** (Switzerland) said that the regional environment in which UNRWA was operating remained extremely volatile and that the Palestine refugees were particularly affected by the lack of tangible progress in achieving a settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Agency played a key role in meeting the refugees' needs, but its precarious financial situation might affect its performance of that role. It was therefore essential for the Agency to pursue its ambitious reforms and to improve its capacity to respond to crises, issues which should be addressed under its new medium-term strategy for 2016-2021. In that regard, his delegation noted with concern that the protection of the fundamental rights of the Palestine refugees had been under threat and that the international community's response had been inadequate.

46. Despite the resumption of the peace process, international humanitarian law and human rights continued to be systematically violated in the West Bank, in particular in East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. The armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic spared neither people nor property, including the Agency's facilities, and had led to the forced displacement of half of the Palestine refugees in that country. His Government therefore called on the parties to the conflict to respect international law with regard to the refugees affected, and on host countries to respect the refugees' right to seek asylum and protection by observing the principle of non-refoulement, as recalled in the statement by the President of the Security Council issued in October 2013 (S/PRST/2013/15).

47. Given its difficult operational environment, UNRWA must be assured of adequate and predictable funding in order to fulfil its mandate. In that connection, Switzerland had made a commitment to biannual funding to increase the predictability of the Agency's resources, and increased its contribution by 10 per cent. It also intended to substantially increase its regular contribution to the General Fund and to make a further multi-year contribution specifically earmarked for reforms. It had also mobilized additional resources to meet the most urgent needs of Palestine refugees affected by the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

48. His Government appreciated recent efforts by the international community to fund the Agency, including those of the League of Arab States and new donors such as Brazil and the Russian Federation. It encouraged the Agency to adopt complementary measures to its ongoing reforms and more extensive

emergency preparedness and poverty reduction policies. His delegation expected the Advisory Commission and its subcommittee to rise to the current and future challenges confronting the Agency by making commitments which should be reflected in the medium-term strategy for 2016-2021, and stood ready to facilitate a constructive dialogue in that regard between all the relevant stakeholders.

49. **Mr. Ben Sliman** (Tunisia) said that, as the situation of many Palestine refugees in the Agency's fields of operation deteriorated, the Agency was finding it increasingly difficult to meet their most basic needs. It was thus critical that adequate financial resources should be made available so that the Agency could fulfil its mandate. The international community was deeply concerned about the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, where over 420,000 Palestine refugees urgently required basic assistance. Many had lost their homes, their livelihoods or family members. Tunisia urged all parties to the conflict to fulfil their obligations under international humanitarian law and ensure that Palestine refugees and other civilians in the Syrian Arab Republic were not targeted and that their homes were not damaged. Meanwhile, in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation and Israeli restrictions were seriously impeding the work of the Agency and compromising the safety of its staff. Tunisia commended the Agency for its efforts to continue to operate under those very difficult circumstances.

50. His delegation strongly supported the resumption of direct talks between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, which he hoped would yield significant progress. The issue of refugees was a key aspect of the question of Palestine; it would be impossible to achieve a long-term solution to the conflict unless the Palestinian people were able to establish a sovereign and independent State based on the pre-1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital.

51. **Mr. León González** (Cuba) said that UNRWA was doing extraordinary work to improve the living conditions of the Palestine refugees; there was no justification for the Palestinians continuing to languish under the Israeli occupation that was depriving them of their human rights, including the right of self-determination and the right of return. The deterioration of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, was a source of serious concern, and several of Israel's illegal practices, such as the building of the separation wall, expropriation of land and construction of settlements continued in flagrant violation of international law. The humanitarian situation was alarming, particularly in the Gaza Strip, where Israel's policy of restricting the movement of goods and people was impeding vital activities such as the rebuilding of schools. Israel must put an end to its policy of closures, which was causing serious socioeconomic damage.

52. UNRWA was obliged to carry out its work in extremely difficult conditions. Losses incurred as a consequence of transit delays and restricted access must be reimbursed. It was unacceptable for Israel to continue to violate international agreements on the protection of United Nations premises and personnel. The international community must address the Agency's alarming financial situation; its financing shortfalls were undermining its ability to carry out its mandate and compromising the ongoing institutional development process. His Government urged the donor community to fulfil its pledges to UNRWA. Cuba firmly supported the struggle of the Palestinian people to exercise their inalienable right of self-determination.

53. **Mr. Sharoni** (Israel), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that Israel had approved 277 development projects in the past three years, had recently agreed to supply 5 billion cubic metres more water to Gaza, and would soon start work to increase that supply even further. Israel had supported the completion of a sewage treatment project sponsored by the World Bank in northern Gaza and had approved the entry of building materials and equipment into Gaza for that purpose. It was also assisting with a World Bank project to increase the production capacity of an electrical power plant to meet the needs of the sewage treatment facility. The supply of construction materials to the private sector had also increased, although Israel had recently discovered a concrete-lined tunnel intended for terrorist purposes, leading it to suspend deliveries. As for the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, 105 human rights violations had reportedly been documented between August 2012 and September 2013, where the victims had been executed or killed under torture in detention, contrary to all national, regional and international conventions.

The meeting rose at 5.55 p.m.